

A Report to the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs by Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning

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by

Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning

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I. Executive Summary

This report describes work performed by the Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning (SEMCOL) in the summer of 2008. Its purpose was to examine the idea that outside of schools there are numerous organizations providing learning opportunities, and that it might be useful to study them to discover how extensive these activities are, who has access to them, what the resource base is that supports the increasingly extensive learning taking place outside of schools and what can we do to improve this “system.”

During the course of this grant supported work we contacted more than 40 organizations and interviewed 50 people. We discovered it is not easy to answer fundamental questions about learning outside of schools. Most organizations offering learning either do not formally evaluate themselves, or use varied methods to do so. This makes it even harder to know exactly who the participants are in this “system”, who is paying for what, and how much learning is actually taking place.

On the other hand we found great enthusiasm for the project. Many people understood the value of trying to come to grips with non-school learning. Specifically, while we are not yet able to answer key underlying questions about the extent and impact of non-school learning, this report did lead to the creation of a new website that will be a one-stop site for all learning in Southeast Minneapolis. The existence of this site will make it possible to begin to gather information that can address key questions.

Secondly, this report also led to the creation of another related project – the attempt to reach out to people (especially to those cut off from learning success in the

current school system) using video stories of learning. These videos – as we have seen from the first few created – are capable of both inspiring and attracting people to wider community learning opportunities. Both of these positive steps are described in this report, and are the concrete ways that the work described in this report will be continued.

II. Background

A. SEMCOL

The Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning (SEMCOL) is a non-profit organization incorporated in 2003 by representatives from three neighborhood organizations in Southeast Minneapolis. Our mission is to unite the community to support learning and reading, family by family, person by person throughout Southeast Minneapolis.

We believe the establishment of a culture of learning in homes and in the community is the foundation for all educational success. We hope to demonstrate it is possible to bring together an entire community to support learning, especially for families most in need of such support. In addition, we believe that institutions (schools, community centers, libraries, businesses, museums, etc.) can play a crucial role as learning resources when they become more flexible in the ways they support learning.

This report describes the continuing effort to formalize and deepen SEMCOL's understanding of the local learning system in the Southeast Minneapolis community. This effort received support from the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.

B. The Situation

With a few exceptions, the network of neighborhood associations in Minneapolis (those organizations formally identified as participating in the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program) do not concern themselves with learning, education, or supporting successful schools. This responsibility is given to parents of school age children and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). The neighborhood organizations concern themselves with involvement in issues such as safety, economic development, transportation and general livability, while parents and PTAs concern themselves with involvement in academic and other school-related issues.

SEMCOL has existed for six years with the goal to demonstrate that a grassroots neighborhood organization can be effectively involved in supporting learning, education, and schools. Through its experience, SEMCOL has recognized the richness of learning in the community. Its programs highlight how learning goes well beyond schooling, and how increasing the connections and awareness of non-school-based learning can be beneficial to community members.

SEMCOL's work also has led to an understanding that issues of educational access extend beyond the school. For example, while it is understood which populations of kids are not doing well in our schools, it is currently unknown if certain populations are systematically cut off from learning opportunities in the wider community as well. Questions arise such as who uses the libraries? Who participates in community education programs? Do families need support getting access to ELL and/or job trainings? How much learning is even taking place outside of schools?

When educational issues are considered these questions are rarely asked, partly because we don't have a good conception of what is available in what we call "the non-school learning system". Until these and many other similar questions can be asked, and are tentatively answered, attempts at educational reform will be handicapped because they are working with limited data mostly focused on school-based learning.

C. Questions to be Answered, Outcomes Sought

The main objective of our research initially was to gather data about what opportunities are available to whom. We hoped this would make it possible to write a report describing Southeast Minneapolis' local learning system. This in itself would be a new accomplishment and could lead to the raising of new policy questions to be considered in the future.

Specifically, SEMCOL sought to answer the following three questions:

- What learning opportunities exist in Southeast Minneapolis?
- Who has access to these local (non-school) learning systems? And do obstacles prevent access to parts of a local learning system, making certain learning opportunities inaccessible for some?
- What policy questions should be asked about inequalities of educational opportunities that may be associated with local learning systems?

In addition it was our intent to create a report summarizing our findings and setting the stage for further action. As will be described below, the need to create a website that acts as a linking device to both connect learning activities, and promote access to them emerged during the course of the study. This site now exists in a prototype form and is one of the major outcomes of this effort.

III. What Exists

A. Introduction

The system that is the focus of this report is not often thought of as a system. It is made up of many separate organizations, some running many programs, with little information shared from one organization to the next. Despite this lack of a common administrative unity, the concept of a system is still valuable when considering local learning efforts.

The findings described in this report are preliminary. They suggest research and policy questions that will lead to a deeper understanding of the local learning system in the future for in Southeast Minneapolis. Through the course of this project we contacted more than 40 organizations and interviewed 50 individuals. We discovered that to understand how people learn, it is useful to think of three levels of understanding. They are: how learning takes place for *individual* people; how learning takes place and is supported by *institutions*; and how general *social systems* approach and support learning.

B. Individuals

Learning resources not directly associated with programmatic learning opportunities are widely available in Southeast Minneapolis. In fact, based on our interviews with numerous people, this type of learning is the predominant learning experience in the lives of Southeast residents, and in the lives of people who come to Southeast in order to learn. We developed a questionnaire to find out about the extent of people's learning. Perhaps the key question we asked was "if we painted yellow paint on

the bottom of your shoes and watched where you went over the course of three to four weeks, which would you describe as being places you feel like you are growing, learning, and really becoming who you want to be?” Numerous learning stories emerged in response to the “yellow paint” question.

For example, one mother told us about how she uses the library in conjunction with public spaces - such as parks and museums - to organize learning outings for her son. For them, a walk along the riverfront is easily transformed into an exploration of the history of Minneapolis, or an analysis of trees growing in river valleys. Another person, a teenage boy, told us about how basketball organizes his learning. In addition to being on a team and attending scheduled practices and games, he also participates in pickup games at Luxton Recreation Center and often uses their outdoor court to practice by himself before the park even opens, while the sun is coming up.

The learning stories told by these two individuals reveal how the educational use of learning resources extends far beyond the programmatic offerings advertised by institutions. Many individuals use available resources to organize learning opportunities that serve their purposes. This creative work by individuals is what underlies and binds the local learning system together.

A retired woman we spoke with told us about her love of needlework. She is a member of three guilds and regularly attends their conferences, workshops, retreats, and seminars. She also has more informal stitching get-togethers with her friends. In addition, to the learning activities related to needlework, she takes classes and attends public lectures on Jewish studies at the University of Minnesota, studies Arabic in Northeast Minneapolis, and takes courses related to her volunteer advocacy work. Again, the

network of learning represented in her stories illustrates how the learning activities in an individual's life extend beyond the boundaries of one institution and its programs.

Major Outcome: From the analysis of individual learning we were reminded that at the heart of learning is the story that captures the experience of joy, or of growth, or of the personal realization that life is in flux in a way you want or need. This central experience of learning is not fundamentally about subject matter, nor is it fundamentally about institutions. This led to our decision to use video stories that reveal the inner learning experience, as the key way to begin to capture learning and organize it in Southeast Minneapolis. We proposed to do this on a website. We think that with these videos we can build a bridge that will attract all learners. There have been other websites that have tried to organize learning - we found many in Great Britain where most of them had fallen into disuse. These websites tended to organize learning by either subject matter (cooking, algebra, history, web design, etc.) or by institution (what is being offered at the library this month or what classes are being offered through Community Education, etc). Based on this aspect of the project, we resolved to use the essence of learning, the story that communicates the experience and feeling at the heart of learning.

C. Institutions

Southeast Minneapolis' local learning system includes hundreds of programmatic learning opportunities. These opportunities take the form of classes, lessons, workshops, lectures, youth programs, summer camps, and church groups. Many unique and informal forms exist in addition, such as the Women's Study Group organized by female residents of the Prospect Park neighborhood or the Community Gardens organized by Southeast Como Improvement Association, etc. Within each category, a variety of purposes and

objectives exist. For example, class offerings in Southeast Minneapolis include language classes, photography classes, and yoga classes, to name just a few.

Most of the programmatic learning opportunities available in Southeast Minneapolis are developed and carried out by local organizations, some offering a wide variety of learning opportunities. Minneapolis Community Education, for example, provides classes for youth and adults with topics ranging from cooking to computers. Other organizations focus on a specific topic. IFP Minnesota, a media arts organization, offers classes and workshops related to film, video, and photography. Other organizations focus on a specific population such as the Luxton Recreation Center, which centers its programs on youth in the Glendale housing development.

Each of the many organizations active in Southeast Minneapolis brings valuable learning resources to the community. Many also find ways to organize or otherwise make use of learning resources outside their organization. Minneapolis Community Education, for example, is a large organization with financial resources and access to facilities well beyond that of most other organizations, but it still depends on the interest and expertise of community members to offer the variety of adult enrichment classes. These community members, who are paid as instructors, do not typically receive training from Minneapolis Community Education, they bring their expertise from other experiences.

In addition, the University of Minnesota sits at the heart of Southeast Minneapolis. As will be described below as we decided to deal with it as a major social system, rather than a local organization.

Major Outcome: We determined to significantly add to the website of the Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning (SEMCOL) by creating a searchable

directory of learning opportunities on the home page. That page would offer a one-stop way of finding out what was available from which institutions in and around Southeast Minneapolis. In addition we think that this site can be a way of gathering information that we still seek in order to better understand the wider learning system.

Creating this site took longer than we forecasted (thus the delay in this report). However, we are pleased to announce the site is now operational and can be found while in final stage development at <http://semcol.learningdreams.org>; and soon will be found at <http://www.semcol.org> when it formally becomes the regular SEMCOL website.

D. Collaboration: Learning as an organized social system

Outside of school learning is generally thought of as being located in various programs and institutions, administered by Parks and Recreation, offered by Community Education, etc. But these are not thought of as being part of a system, even though they often serve the same clients, have overlapping missions, and are funded by public sources. Furthermore, discussions of education usually connote “schooling”. There is the school system, and then there is everything else.

This project gave us the opportunity to explore the idea that non-school learning is supported by informal partnerships and contacts that exist at all times – and also allowed us to explore the possibility that non-school learning might be thought of as a system, which if true would create new possibilities to understand and support learning.

We held meetings with leaders in the City including the Director of Community education for the Minneapolis Public Schools, high administrators in the Hennepin County Libraries, and also the Minneapolis Park and Recreation board. All of these and others were cautiously interested in the idea of a ‘non-school learning system’. They

understand it to exist in some difficult to define sense. However, they do not have the time - given their own responsibilities - to pursue its creation or support. But the notion there could be an increased understanding of the services they deliver together, and potential policy implications could follow from that, is interesting enough for them to offer to work with this project in the future.

The University of Minnesota is a special case because of its vast size and the enormous resources dedicated to the learning it represents. But how does it relate to its local community? It is in Southeast Minneapolis, but can it work with the local institutions? How would it work with other learning institutions if it can't even be organized and connected within itself?

A joke supposedly told by former University of Minnesota President Mark Yudof that captures the disorganized nature of the University was repeated to us at one interview. The joke consisted of his definition of the University that described the nature of collaboration on campus. "The University is a hundred kingdoms connected by a common sewer system," Yudof said. Another person recommended to us that if we want to know what is happening at the University we would need to go to the websites of each department.

A further aspect of the possibilities for the University working with Southeast Minneapolis has emerged in the creation of a new University/Community partnership called the University District Partnership Alliance. This new organization, created to support relations between the University and the community that might arise due to the building of the new football stadium, might be a potential ally or partner. In fact they have adopted SEMCOL as a partner.

Nevertheless, for the moment connections with the University remain speculative.

Major Outcome: The only significant outcome is the willingness of these organizations to continue talking. These conversations should be pursued in the future.

IV. Access

A. Introduction

The variety of learning opportunities available in and around Southeast Minneapolis is vast. A long list of programmatic offerings covering many topics and purposes reveals this richness, and this list is only a start. Many more undocumented opportunities exist in the creative reorganization or self-directed use of public and private educational resources.

Although many of these resources are available to everyone, it is clear that access is more difficult for some people. Nearly all of the institutions are open and welcoming to anyone who would like to learn, but most end up serving particular subsets of the Southeast Minneapolis population. A variety of factors create obstacles to access. No transportation, inability to pay fees, limited free time, no childcare, and cultural barriers are some of the obvious ones.

In addition, it also must be considered that most of the institutions that are part of Southeast Minneapolis's local learning system are not able to serve everyone. This is not always a shortcoming. Small organizations serving a limited set of participants well are better than large organizations that must compromise quality to serve everyone. However, that is only true if the range of learning opportunities across the many different small organizations contains enough variety to meet everyone's needs. Accordingly, an analysis of access in a local learning system must see each institution and each program

in the context of its complements and alternatives. Fragmented analyses of individual programs or institutions will provide only limited guidance to those seeking systemic change.

B. Data Collection

The goal of this study was to collect enough data to get a sense of access to opportunities at a system-wide level. Achieving this goal was made more difficult by differences in how organizations tracked participation in their programs.

Some organizations had detailed historical data linking each individual who had been a participant in their programs. With these datasets, it was possible to track which individuals participated in which programs, including if the same individual participated in multiple programs. Because of anonymity provisions in how these organizations released their datasets to us, it was not possible to determine a single individual's participation in programs across multiple organizations. This level of detail in data collection was only present in a few of the organizations' participation records.

It was more common for organizations to have counts for each program or session, e.g. 15 people registered for a particular class during the summer 2008 session or eight people attended last Monday's workshop. This kind of data accurately records services delivered from an institutional standpoint, but it inflates the estimated amount of individuals served. The latter statistic is more important for system-wide analyses of access.

The next level of detail provided aggregate participation data across programs and over a set period of time. Often the statistic provided was an estimate of how many people participated or were served over some period of time, such as a semester or year.

A large number of organizations did not have any participation data, and of course, the many informal social groups and non-programmatic learning opportunities did not have any data either.

Some of the organizations tracking participation by individual had detailed demographic data; however, most did not. Other forms of tracking participation included estimates of the age, gender, and racial distribution of participants, but at this level also, these data were not common to collect. An obligation to a funding source was normally the reason for any exception in the general lack of demographic data.

Major Outcome: The lack of systematic concern given to this issue by the organizations in the city makes it impossible – for now – to offer a serious analysis of the level of access provided by wider non-school learning organizations. However, we think that because of the high level of learning activity outside of schools, it is becoming necessary to create a partnership of organizations and people that will be dedicated to understanding and analyzing learning in its widest sense. We believe that one outcome of this partnership will be the ability to focus more effectively on this issue, and finally arrive at meaningful data.

V. Policy Questions

We started this project by raising certain policy questions that we hoped by the end of the project we could begin to answer.

We now are able to offer an initial response to the question: what opportunities are available in Southeast Minneapolis? The opportunities are rich and varied, and can now be found and scrutinized in one centralized location, the SEMCOL website's new interactive Learning Directory. Though the site is not complete, we believe it is a fine

start to helping community members find new ways to learn locally, and gather information about that learning.

We had less success with the two other questions we hoped to answer. First, who has access to learning? Second, what is the extent of resources dedicated to the “non-school learning system?” As described above, the reporting on both of these questions is either inconsistent or non-existent. Some institutions do a pretty good job (Community Education is a fine example) but as a whole we still cannot answer these questions. They are still important and need to be answered. Again, a local partnership could make these questions the focus of future work.

VI. Conclusion: Projects that have Grown out of this Grant

As a result of this grant supported work:

- 1) The Southeast Minneapolis Council on Learning has initiated a new web site that offers one-stop information to support learning in Southeast Minneapolis.
- 2) The Learning Dreams project at the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota will initiate a video storytelling-based learning project.
- 3) A conversation will be held at the University of Minnesota and in the wider community about the possibilities of better coordination in regard to learning and the community, possibly leading to the creation of a local partnership to answer these questions.
- 4) Because the general outcome of this grant work has confirmed the need to continue to explore the possibilities for non-school learning, further funds will be sought to continue the work.